
THE LAW OF OUR LOVES; AND A LESSON THEREFROM.

The human soul cannot live without some kind of love. Every man has natural affections. God intended that these should be directed to himself and humanity, attract the mind to the most worthy objects of thought, and keep the will fixed upon the highest course of action. But even if this does not happen, the need to love still remains, and these affections cluster about other and unworthy objects and persons. Therefore, wicked men and wicked habits of life are loved with an attachment as perilous as unnatural. A man cannot exist without loving something. Love is life; the capability to love is the capability to live; and the depth and purity of love is a sure test of true greatness of being. Man cannot banish this need from his soul. He will love—either what is high or what is low, either like an angel or a demon.

Selfishness is merely a diseased form of love. The selfish man differs from others only in the quality and objects of his affections. He bestows himself upon things which will yield him the most speedy and full return. He hugs worldly

possessions and pleasures close to his heart. He has not forgotten to love, but he loves falsely.

The great difference in men is not in the possession, but in the quality of their affections. One consecrates his powers to God and humanity, and loves wisely and with a celestial strength and purity; others, in various degrees, do not give themselves to the true purpose of life, and are punished by loving basely. There is a great variety in the objects of affection. Probably there are not two souls in existence who love precisely the same things in the same degree. Each spirit selects its own company out of the whole universe, and creates a heaven of its own liking. The objects of human affection are almost infinite in variety: so the quality of love is the surest test of difference between men.

How far can we control our affections? We have seen that love is a necessity of our nature, and its quality a test of our character. Have we the power to determine that quality? There is an opinion quite prevalent that a man cannot control his affections. They are supposed to be wayward, unmanageable and irresponsible. And, in practice, men commonly obey their affections as if they were a destiny. This popular opinion contains just half the truth, and is practically false because it omits the other half. It is true, in one sense, that we cannot control our love. We are obliged to love according to our characters, and we cannot violently change the current of our affections.

But the real question lies back of this. How came we to love what we, at present, do love? Had we anything to do in producing that condition of mind and heart by which we are compelled, for the time, to love in a particular direction. The answer to this will expose the fallacy of the popular opinion.

Probably our natural constitution of mind and temperament, and the changes produced upon us by causes beyond our control, have a great influence in determining the objects of our affections. We cannot radically change our nature—at least, not suddenly. For a time our love must depend upon what nature and circumstances have made us. But no man is obliged, by his constitution or by circumstances, to love what is actually evil. True, one may be born with diseased propensities, and may have been exposed to corrupting influences during youth, which determine, for a time, the quality of his affections. But such a person always has a consciousness of the lowness of his state, and a desire for something higher, strong enough to lead him into a better condition, if he will follow it; and this possibility of becoming better determines the whole question in its moral aspect. We have the capacity to follow our ideal of excellence, and, by thus doing, of increasing our capacity to love what is excellent and beautiful to an unlimited degree.

It is not, then, a matter of fate or chance what shall be the quality of our affection. The quality of our love depends upon our character. If we follow truth, devote ourselves to right-doing, and cast off temptations to selfish and sinful living, we shall become good, and cannot help loving what is good and beautiful. On the other hand, if we love partly more than truth, lose our

manhood in a wicked course of life, and become the slaves of our lowest impulses, we must love what is low and like ourselves. The moral quality of our affections thus being dependent on our character, we have just as much control over it, as we have over our character. Nobody doubts that he can make himself good or bad, in the same sense that he can do anything else. We build up our characters by our daily thought, speech and conduct, and insensibly mould them to the shape they assume; therefore, we create our own loves in the same way, since we love according to what we are. The mistake of the popular opinion is in supposing that, because we cannot instantly change the current of our affections, we have no power over them. The process must be gradual, and depends upon a previous change in the character; yet, though slow and imperceptible, it is certain. We determine the moral quality of our love by everything we think, say, or do—by the whole course of our voluntary action.

Having thus attempted to show that we have power over our affections, let us briefly indicate the process by which a man may degrade himself, so that his love at last shall become his most fearful retribution.

Deterioration of character, and consequently of the affections, is so gradual that few are conscious of it. The character becomes degraded imperceptibly—even while the outward appearance of decency is preserved. Evil thoughts, ambitious purposes, avaricious desire, revenge, contempt, hatred, pride, are secretly cherished and brooded over. Sensual and corrupt feelings get a lodgment in the heart, distract the intellect, pollute the imagination, undermine the will, while the person hardly knows his danger. Day after day, a new crowd of these wicked, foolish, malignant guests is entertained, and no harm is apprehended while the outward life is yet firm. But each of these secret mental indulgences makes its mark upon the character, just as every violation of the laws of health breaks down the constitution, and hastens on final dissolution. Little by little, the tone of the mind is changed. The person becomes more and more incapable of loving nobly, or of cherishing affections and thoughts which his reason and conscience approve. He is below his own admiration; and, in spite of his better reason and occasional efforts to lift himself out of his low state, he is compelled to love and follow persons and practices which in his very soul he may abhor. And this slavery to wicked affections is an awful retribution, perhaps the worst that can come upon the sinful spirit.

A young man may in this way begin a downward course of conduct, which, after a few years, shall leave his soul captive in the hands of the lowest affections. Let him employ his leisure hours in dissipated or low society, in frivolous conversation, or corrupt reading: let him trample on the reverence for honor and perfect honesty with which he began life, and gradually go over to the practice of half-disonest tricks by which a man may kill his conscience and fill his puris; let him give free admission to every impure thought, and lay up in his memory every vulgar

and obscene jest and turn of expression; let him fix his eye on riches, or some post of honor in the gift of the people, and determine, at all hazards and by any means, to obtain them. He may thus, while outwardly decent, produce a total change in his character in a few years, and, while yet living in respectable society, really love best the lowest persons and things. He may think that he has lost nothing by indulgence in these habits of thought and life. But he has lost *much*. He has lost his power to love the best things—the highest, most worthy objects. He has lost the power to enjoy the society and conversation of noble, sincere men—the excellent of the earth; he has lost his consciousness of innocence and honesty, and is now able to derive a contemptible and demonic pleasure from over-reaching his neighbor. The love of place or popularity has caused him to lose his independence, and made him a coward, and a slave to the very people whom he despises. He has lost his relish for the society of pure and high-minded women, and loves only the low, frivolous and gossiping, and such as best gratify his depraved taste. He has lost almost everything of value. He has ceased to love the best and most elevated things in life. His affections gravitate towards, and grovel amongst, sinful, base, unworthy objects. He has lost innocence, and purity, and honor, and integrity, and sincerity, and independence. Is not this loss enough for one soul? He has brought upon himself fearful retribution. He has degraded himself till, gradually, he has become incapable of elevated and noble affections, and he is now given up to the wild, passionate, restless feelings which make a bad man's soul like an ocean tossed by storms, to which no calm day ever comes. His *low and wicked loves* are the *evil spirits* that inflict the punishment due to his transgression.

And, in like manner, a young woman may destroy the beauty, innocence and strength of her character, till she is compelled to live in the same low region of life. She may neglect mental culture, read only books full of foul insinuations and unnatural delineations of life, may love excitement and pleasure better than home, and overlook all preparation for the duties of womanhood. A few years of such a life will cause her dreadful loss—loss of delicate and pure affections, loss of the true dignity of womanhood, loss of love of good society, loving instead the weak and foolish, loss of love of home and rational enjoyment. And, then, when the great want of a woman's soul comes, she will bestow her affections, and give herself away, loving one low and unworthy, but like herself. Her frivolous mind and restless passions will compel her to such a wretched union. Henceforth she must live in company with the lowest loves. She must live on husks and chaff.
